Veiled in the Flesh
First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest
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Ideas that changed the world. Ideas that change the way we perceive the world and influence how we live. Ideas that define what we may hope for.

The first was the idea of God as Creator and the creation as a reflection of God's goodness: the high notion of humankind as the crown of God's creation blessed with honor, dignity, worth – and responsibility. And, the persistent, nagging, annoying tendency of human beings to make a mess of things – their own lives and relationships, their communities and nature, indeed, the whole world and universe.

This morning the second of those big world-altering, life-changing ideas: Incarnation.

In exactly three months you and I and people all over the world will stand up and sing with all the gusto we can muster a wonderful tune by Felix Mendelssohn (the son of a distinguished Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, who later converted to Christianity and was baptized) and striking words by Charles Wesley –

"Veiled in the flesh, the Godhead see,
Hail the Incarnate Deity,
Pleased in flesh with us to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark, the Herald Angels sing,
Glory to the newborn King."

I don't know about you but I have different favorite Christmas Carols: Sometimes it's Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming, other times it's O Little Town of Bethlehem. Of course high on the list always is Silent Night, Holy Night. In the Bleak Midwinter always gets to me. But every year, always, near the top of my favorites is hark the Herald Angels Sing with its fine musical structure and the astonishing, shocking even, suggestion that the ultimate mystery, the ultimate reality, the ultimate truth – comes to us "veiled in the flesh – Jesus our Emmanuel." Emmanuel – God with us. Breathtaking: one of the biggest, most influential ideas anybody ever had, and an idea that defines who we are as Christians.

Maybe a full century after the birth of Jesus, one of his followers, a brilliant writer by the name of John, a man steeped in the concepts and images of Greek philosophy put it elegantly:

In the beginning was the Word,
(the Greek "Logos," word, communication, revelation of the essence

of a thing)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God…

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son of the Father, full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God…It is God the Son who has made him known. (John 1:1, 14)

That is quite a claim, a theological blockbuster. We have seen God. His name was Jesus.

A few years after the life of Jesus – much closer than John, maybe as close as 15=20 years, a follower, a convert who at first had been devoted to stamping out the new phenomenon that had not yet begun to be called Christianity, a brilliant Jewish Pharisee, was the first to think systematically and deeply about Jesus. His name was Paul, and he traveled extensively throughout the Roman Empire, announcing, proclaiming to anyone who would listen – that Jesus of Nazareth, a Palestinian Jew who was executed by Rome, was actually the promised Messiah, the Christ, the savior – not just of God's people Israel but savior of the world.

Little communities of believers sprang up wherever Paul traveled. We know about them because of letters he later wrote to them, and in them, on occasion, Paul goes deep and tries to put into words and ideas what had happened in Jesus of Nazareth. To the little community of believers in the Greek city of Philippi, he wrote:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who" – and what follows was probably a hymn that the early believers sang together when they gathered weekly –

"Christ Jesus,
who, though in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness,
and being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the
point of death -
even death on a cross -
(and here it comes!)
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

Jesus Christ the Lord."
Ephesians 2:5-9, 11

In a letter to the community of believers in Colossae, Paul – or one of his disciples writing in his name, took it up several notches higher:

"He is the image of the invisible god, in him all things in heaven and on earth were created…For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things." Colossians 1: 15, 20

That is a huge leap from the way things began, a modest, mostly unnoticed birth in Bethlehem.

There are four gospels – "Gospel" – the Greek word for "good news" – written between about 55 or 60 years after the birth to the latest, the Fourth Gospel, written maybe 90-100-120 years after the birth. They are not biographies of Jesus exactly. They are announcements, proclamations, lengthy sermons on the topic of Good News. And each one tells it slightly differently (all written in Greek). Mark, the earliest to be written and the shortest is full of action, urgency. Matthew is probably next – and is the most obviously Jewish of the four with more mention of Moses, the law, temple, and Jewish practices. Luke is third. The three are called Synoptic Gospels because they tell essentially the same story and the same sequence of events. It is clear that Matthew and Luke have a copy of Mark in front of them as they write. The Fourth Gospel, John, is much more Greek than the Synoptics, with its classically Greek philosophical prelude – Word and Light in the Darkness.

Only Matthew and John tell about Jesus birth, Mark and John begin when Jesus is almost 30 years old.

Matthew makes sure his readers know this is a Jewish story in the very first sentence.

"An account of the genealogy of Jesus the messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" – David and Abraham, the most important figures in Hebrew history, and through a tedious list of names right up to a Jacob – not the old Jacob – that's another story and a great one. This Jacob has a son whose name is Joseph, "husband of Mary of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah." Even though Joseph's DNA is not going to be in the baby, Matthew takes great pains, nevertheless, to assure us that this is a Jewish story about a Jewish baby who will become an absolutely Jewish man.

In Matthew it is Joseph who first hears about Mary conceiving, "before they lived together' is the way Matthew puts it. Poor Joseph – what a pickle he's in. He and young Mary are engaged but there has not even

been an opportunity for sexual intimacy and Mary turns up pregnant. The logical, conventional thing to do, of course, is break off the engagement and leave Mary to deal with the repercussions of an illegitimate birth, not to mention the public shame. Matthew, however, says that Joseph listens to the entire angel message, obeys instructions, arranges for a quick wedding. Matthew calls Joseph a "righteous man," which he certainly was.

Then, just as soon as Matthew has certified the Jewishness of the child about to be born, he pulls the rug out. The story began when several non-Jews, Magi, wise men from the East, Persia, Arabia, show up at the King's palace in Jerusalem, explaining that they have been following a celestial phenomenon, a new star, the sign of the birth of a new King. Herod is obviously concerned about the news: he's the King, after all. So he calls his leadership team, political consultants, together and asks if they know anything about a new King. It turns out they do: Herod's not a very good Jew. He doesn't know that it's right there in scripture – Bethlehem – "from you shall come a ruler to shepherd my people, Israel." So, Herod, now in panic mode, sends the visitors off to Bethlehem with instructions to return and report what they find – an instruction they choose to ignore. They find the baby – and his mother and father – in a home, Matthew says, and they kneel down and present the precious gifts they have brought. Garrison Keillor, by the way, says the magi were obviously Lutheran because they didn't arrive empty handed. Instead their wives obviously sent baby gifts along with them. Myrrh, Keillor says, was actually a covered dish, macaroni and cheese. "They'll be hungry," she tells her husband as he leaves. "And don't forget to bring back the dish." (Life Among the Lutherans)

The significant, and very provocative, point here is that after documenting the Jewishness of the story of the newborn, Matthew says the first people to see him and welcome him and bow down and worship are not Jews, but Persians, Arabs.

The immediate effect of the birth, according to Matthew is a terrible tragedy. When Herod discovers that he has been deceived, he goes into a rage and orders his soldiers to kill all the babies in Bethlehem under two years of age – which they do. So now we not only have religious and racial diversity in the story, but now also the kind of human tragedy that, unhappily, is part of the larger story of humankind, with relentless consistency.

Mary, Joseph and baby flee to Egypt until Herod dies and then make their way back to Israel- Judah – to Nazareth where they will live as a family. Again, Matthew is reminding us that this is a Jewish story…just like Israel in Egyptian slavery, the holy family spends time in Egypt too.

Then, without explanation, Matthew leaps ahead thirty years, without so much as a word about what happened in that long time: Jesus' childhood,

adolescence, young manhood. He's not a biographer, remember, even though we wish he were. The story begins again with a strange figure in the wilderness, John the Baptist, looking and sounding or all the world like one of the ancient prophets of Israel. "Prepare the way of the Lord," John shouts, quoting the prophet Isaiah. Jesus comes out to hear John, is baptized by John in the Jordan River, goes, himself, into the wilderness to figure out what to do next – spends 40 days in the wilderness, just like Israel's 40 years wandering in the wilderness of Sinai, and emerges proclaiming that the day of the Lord has come, the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Both Mark and John begin their gospels with John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism. In Mark, like Matthew and Luke, Jesus spends time in the wilderness. In John, he recruits disciples and immediately goes to work at a wedding in Cana where he turns water into wine.

Luke begins with a literary device, unique to the time. He is writing a letter to a fictional character by the name of Theophilus. It is a letter in two parts: the first tells the story of Jesus; the second part, which also begins by addressing Theophilus, is about the early Christian movement, after Jesus' life and death and resurrection, the church. It is the fifth book in the New Testament, The Acts of the Apostles.

Luke's use of Greek - the language in which all four Gospels, and Paul's letters, was written, is elegant. And so is his style from beginning to end. In the first chapter Luke tells about the birth of John the Baptist, an angel visiting his mother, Elizabeth, the angel's visitation to Mary, Mary's visit with Elizabeth – her older relative, Mary's response to everything that is swirling around her. Each event contains beautiful poetry – Mary's Magnificat – "My soul magnifies the Lord – for he has looked with favor on his handmaiden – his lowly servant." Finally, the birth of Jesus. Luke tells us about the census, the long journey to Bethlehem, the crowded inn, the birth during the night and the manger.

Instead of Magi, Luke tells the lovely, everyone's favorite, story of the shepherds, and the angel chorus filling the night sky, and the angel telling the shepherds about the birth, and their hurried trip from the hillside to the manger. In Matthew, wealthy foreign dignitaries are the first to welcome Jesus and present costly treasure. In Luke, the first to witness and welcome are shepherds, poor, marginal, economic, social, and religious outcasts. There are rough characters, unwashed, illiterate, living on the edge of society. It is a theme Luke will emphasize throughout his presentation of the Good News.

Luke tells a story about the 12-year-old Jesus on a trip to Jerusalem with his parents to celebrate Passover and his experience discussing

theology with the Elders in the Temple. But, as with the other three, Luke then tells about Jesus and John the Baptist.

Matthew, Mark and Luke, each with its own unique style and particular emphasis, tell essentially the same story. John's narrative will end up at the same place, but tells stories of miracles that are not in the Synoptic gospels, and presents the events in Jesus' life in a different sequence from the other three.

The story:

Mary and Joseph and their son settle back in their hometown of Nazareth; Joseph was a carpenter, a builder, and the assumption is that he supported his family – there will be brothers and sisters after Jesus – by his trade. Jesus, according to tradition would have learned Joseph's trade and worked alongside him in the carpenter shop, or building houses, making home repairs. He would have attended the Synagogue with his father and there learned to read Hebrew. He spoke Aramaic, as did everyone else in Nazareth except the Roman soldiers who probably spoke a form of rough Greek called Koine Greek – the language the Gospels were written in. We really don't know a thing about the first 30 years of Jesus' life except the one story, a trip to Jerusalem when he was about 12 to celebrate the Passover. The assumption is that Joseph died during that 18-20 year period because he is never mentioned again, although his mother Mary will be a major presence throughout Jesus' life. When he is 30 years of age Jesus has a profound spiritual experience when he heard his cousin John preaching, was baptized by John during which he begins to sense that he is being called by God to a unique life and witness. He goes alone into the wilderness to figure out what to do with his life, faces tempting alternatives and emerges after 40 days with resolve to go wherever and do whatever God calls him to go and do.

He recruits a small group of men – and probably women too, - to help. Peter, James, John, and Andrew; they leave what they are doing and follow along. He makes a home in Capernaum, where he lives and maybe the others as well. From Capernaum they walk down the roads and through the villages of Galilee, he stops in the Synagogues and teaches, and begins to gather crowds of people. His message is – Good News, the Kingdom of God is here, among you. And he begins to receive the sick, elderly, crippled and the children. His reputation grows – as do the crowds who gather wherever he is.

The religious establishment in Jerusalem – the Priests in the Temple, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who are determined to keep the nation's identity alive in spite of Roman occupation – hear about this itinerant preacher in Galilee and send delegations north to investigate. They listen, challenge him, argue fine points of the Law of Moses with him. Gradually,

they become more hostile and try to ask questions to prompt him to say something that will get him in trouble with the authorities. He continues to heal, teach, tell unforgettable stories and demonstrate a radical grace and hospitality, welcoming, touching, eating with marginal people, unclean people, people his religion teaches are unacceptable, unclean. It goes on for three years and as the Passover approaches that third, final year, he decides to go down to Jerusalem. His disciples understand immediately that he will be courting danger. Jerusalem is where his opponents are. It is the capital city of the nation. People, by the way, are beginning to wonder who he really is. Some are whispering, then saying out loud that he looks and sounds a lot like the promise of Messiah. Some are saying that he is the King of Israel who will sit once again on the throne of David. In the background there are organized parties of revolutionaries who want to drive the hated Romans out, along with their puppet kings – and they see Jesus as exactly the kind of person who could inspire the nation to rise up in revolt. It may be that Judas, one of his closest friends and disciples, was one of them. They were called the "Zealots."

So, against his friends' advice, he heads towards Jerusalem. The Gospels describe a young man with a vision and determination and great courage. He sets his face towards "Jerusalem" they say. When they arrive in the city, one week before the Passover, what his friends were afraid might happen, happens. The city is crowded with something like a million pilgrims, there to celebrate Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery. It is highly patriotic occasion, full of explosive potential. The Romans, in response, move the Governor's residence from Caesarea to Jerusalem for the week. Legions are beefed up to keep order. When the crowds of pilgrims hear that he is coming they erupt in what is a spontaneous political demonstration. They strip branches from the palm trees and rip the cloaks from their backs to create a royal welcome. They quote beloved scripture about the day when the king will arrive, riding on a lowly donkey.

Nearly of the Gospel accounts focus on that day and the one week that follows. He goes to the Temple and provokes another crisis by driving out the people who are selling animals to be sacrificed on the altar and the booths of the people who will exchange Roman coins for Shekels, the Hebrew money used in the Temple. He teaches, heals and on Thursday night, the night before the actual Passover, arranges for a supper that looks a lot like a Seder, during which he breaks a loaf of bread and pours a cup of wine for them all to eat and drink and says mysterious words: "This is my body broken for you…This is my blood shed for you."

The Temple officials, scared to death that he is going to cause such a political disturbance, if not an outright revolt, that the impatient, brutal Roman military might well fall on them all, persuade the Romans that he really is a menace and should be eliminated.

There is a nighttime arrest, a midnight trial before a kangaroo court, a night of torture and then, finally, a confrontation with the Roman Governor himself. Pontius Pilate will try everything he can think of to avoid it, but the crowd, now insistent, smells blood and prevails and Pilate issues the order to execute the prisoner.

It happens, with Roman efficiency, outside the city wall on a hill near the garbage dump where Rome executes prisoners as a public demonstration of what happens to those who disturb Roman peace and order.

Crucifixion is the favored method of execution. Prisoners are tied, sometimes nailed to a cross and left to die of eventual suffocation after as long as 24 hours or more. Because Passover is coming and the Romans needs to get this over with before sundown, Jesus is pierced with a sword that, in addition to the nail wounds in his hands and feet, resulting in his death in three hours.

A brave member of the Jewish High Court, maybe a secret follower, by the name of Joseph or Arimathea, donates his own tomb, takes the lifeless body down from the cross, buries it in the tomb and seals it. His friends, in the meantime, have all fled and are in hiding. All but three women – his mother, Mary Magdalene, and another Mary – who stay and watch.

24 – 30 – 36 hours pass. Sabbath is over at dawn of the first day of a new week. Women go to the tomb to anoint the body with spices, perhaps the very spices the magi presented at this birth. The stone sealing the tomb is open – the tomb is empty. There is a wonderfully chaotic time of running back and forth, announcing he is risen; doubting, running, shouting. One of the women says she saw him: two others, walking away from the city, report that he met them on the road and ate supper with them. According to one report they went fishing and he met them on the lakeshore, in fact cooked fish for their breakfast. Another report was that he came to them in a cloud and they saw him ascend into heaven.

The disciples return to Galilee: a few find their way back to Jerusalem. They start to talk about what happened: people are intrigued, convinced, and gradually number thousands among his followers. More than a decade later they will take his name for themselves: they are Christians.

There is a critical moment in the middle of the story. Jesus and his disciples are walking together near Caesarea Philippi. Out of the blue he asks them: “What are people saying about me? Who do people say I am?” The disciples tell him that some people think he sounds like John the Baptist. Others are saying that he must be Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the ancient prophets returned to life. And then he turns to them. I think they have stopped walking. He looks at them – looks into each face and says, “How about you? Who do you say that I am?” There is a long silence: they

look at the dust at their feet. Finally, Peter, the one who often speaks for them, says it. “You are the Messiah, Christ, in Greek, the Son of the Living God.”

I have always been fascinated with that moment. In fact, when it came time to write a kind of thesis for graduation from Divinity School with a major in New Testament, I chose this passage. I translated it from Greek. I compared it to Hebrew and Aramaic. I read what everybody in history has said about it – from the ancients – right up to contemporary theologians. I analyzed it from the perspective of history, sociology, philosophy and economics. I got a good grade, graduated, was ordained the next week in my home church in Altoona, Pennsylvania, and then shortly after that was invited to preach from that pulpit. My first sermon as an ordained Presbyterian Minister. It was a busy time, so I decided to use that scholarly paper, with all that analysis, bristling with footnotes as my sermon – which I did. It was a big day. My grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins were there. So were high school friends who still couldn’t quite believe what had happened to me, my parents were proud, my father was beside himself. I pretty much laid the whole thing on them in 20 minutes or so. They were, of course, kind and gracious and said all the right things. A high school teacher with whom I had issues and who I had never seen smile, Magdalene Bair, was there. She shook my hand and said, “You’re still talking too fast and too much” and smiled.

There was a brunch in our home and after everyone had left my father and I were sitting in the living room along and he said something that is the most important thing anyone ever said to me: “Johnny,” he said, “you told us what everyone in history said about Jesus. Next time leave some time at the end for what you think.”

The history of what people have thought and believed about him is long and complex. From the beginning some people have regarded him as Messiah – the Christ, the anointed one of God. Others have called him Lord – i.e. the one to whom we give our allegiance and to whom we are ultimately accountable. Others call him Savior, who saves us from sin, guilt, punishment.

For three centuries Christian thought, wrote, and argued about who he was. With the exception of the incident in Matthew 16, Jesus didn’t say much about his identity. And when Peter blurted out that he was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Jesus instructed his disciples not to tell anyone. Apparently he didn’t want arguments about who exactly he was to interfere with what he was doing. It’s a shame the church hasn’t remembered that. And yet, in the first few centuries of the Common Era it became important for the Church to be able to articulate what exactly it believed about him. Some Christians said he was a very good man who died a tragic but heroic death as a martyr. Others said he was a great moral

teacher in the tradition of the Rabbis. Still others said he was divine. Yet others argued that he was also thoroughly human. Some said his death was a tragedy: others said his death was actually God doing something for humankind.

The arguments were fierce. People fought and went to war to defend their beliefs. By now the church had spread throughout the Roman Empire and church leaders called Bishops (from the Greek “Presbyter”) advocated for one view or the other. Finally, the Emperor Constantine who, a few years earlier, had allowed Christianity and the Church to operate freely in a culture that for three hundred years had regarded the faith as a threat to the peace and security of the Empire, finally, Constantine wearied of the arguing and fighting and ordered the Bishops to meet at Nicea, a seaport town in northwest Turkey, and to resolve the matter of who Jesus was once and for all. At the end of the meeting a statement was issued that we know as the Nicean Creed. It is part of our Book of Confessions. It echoes some of the phrases from an older, simpler statement, The Apostles Creed. Nicea digs in and attempts to put into words the lingering mystery of who Jesus was.

> We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ
> the only Son of God,
> eternally begotten of the Father
> God from God, Light from Light,
> true God from true God,
> begotten, not made,
> of one being with the Father.

Nicea was clear. Jesus is divine, “of one being with God.”

Equally vexing, however, was the belief that whatever else Jesus was, he was completely and fully a man, a human being and so another meeting in 451, the Council of Chalcedon said clearly that Jesus Christ is “God with us” but also truly “one of us.” [See Leanne Van Dyk, Believing in Jesus Christ, p. 48]

That is what we believe: Jesus Christ is God with us and, at the same time, truly one of us. Both assertions live in tension: sometimes one or the other, his divinity or his humanity overwhelm the other. Christianity maintains that both are true, equally, simultaneously, profoundly.

We have as much trouble with his humanity as we do with his divinity. Sometimes we have trouble imagining that Jesus was a man, a human being, just like us: that he experienced the same human emotions that we do: that he loved and laughed and became frustrated, impatient and angry, that he knew passionate longing and fear.

You know, there comes a point when we have exhausted reason; when our arguments and explanations wear thin. It is then that we turn to art and music and poetry: that other way of appropriating and experiencing truth and beauty.

Here is a contemporary poet and essayist, Brian Doyle, editor of the University of Portland's Portland magazine.

> "Let me get this straight: the very essence of our common belief, the polestar by which we steer our lives, is the fact that a thin young Jewish man two thousand years ago insisted that life defeats death, hope defeats despair, light defeats darkness? That's ridiculous. That's silly. The evidence is everywhere against it. But he insisted on it, to the point of death – and whether you believe he rose from the dead and again walked the earth for three days, asking for something to eat, or you do not believe such a tall tale, the inarguable fact is that his insistence, his story, his wild message, has persisted and grown and permutated beyond comprehension. Why? It's not only that the religious structure built atop his message that helped his voice persist into our time – I believe it is his sheer insistence on that which is wholly unreasonable that touches us deepest in our hearts, that reaches down and makes us shiver in our deepest bones, that rings the very deep bell of truth inside us." [Grace Notes, p 9-10]

> And here is popular rock singer Joan Osborne:

> If God had a name, what would it be?
> And would you call it to His face?
> If you were faced with Him in all His glory
> What would you ask if you had just one question?

> And yeah, yeah God is great
> Yeah, yeah, God is good
> Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

> What if God was one of us
> Just a slob like one of us
> Just a stranger on the bus
> Trying to make His way home?

> Here is Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer/poet who walks the fields of his farm on Sunday morning and goes home and writes a Sabbath Poem:

> December 25, 1987 Sabbath Poem

> Remembering that it happened once,
> We cannot turn away the thought,

As we go out, cold, to our barns
Toward the long night's end, that we
Ourselves are living in the world
It happened in when it first happened,
That we ourselves, opening a stall
(A latch thrown open countless times
Before), might find them breathing there,
Foreknown: the Child bedded in straw,
The mother kneeling over Him,
The husband standing in belief
He scarcely can believe, in light
That lights them from no source we see,
An April morning's light, the air
Around them joyful as a choir.
We stand with one hand on the door,
Looking into another world
That is this world, the pale daylight
Coming just as before, our chores
To do, the cattle all awake,
Our own frozen breath hanging
In front of us; and we are here
As we have never been before,
Sighted as not before, our place
Holy, although we knew it not.

"Leave some time at the end for what you believe," Dad said.

And so, in one way or another that man places a claim on us and asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Of all the responses, the best, my favorite, is a phrase in a simple hymn I learned as a child.

Fairest Lord Jesus,
Ruler of all nations,
O Thou of God and earth come down
Thee will I cherish
Thee will I honor,
Thou, my soul's glory, joy, and crown.

After we figure out what who Jesus was and what we believe about him the question remains: what is the meaning and significance of his life, death and resurrection. And that leads us back to what we know about his life but also the literal crux of the story- the way his life ends on. Friday afternoon, on a Roman cross outside the walls of Jerusalem near the city garbage dump.

The gospel writers devote a lot of space, maybe one fourth to one third of their accounts to the last seven days of the story. One scholar noted

that they hurry almost slipshod through three years of his public life and ministry, providing a few tantalizing details, rich ethical/moral teaching and brilliant short stories or parables taken mostly from the life of first century Palestine. When they arrive at the first day of the last week of his life they slow down dramatically and begin to focus on detail. The first witnesses and the first to write a record clearly believe that what happened during that last week and particularly from noon on Friday until the first light of dawn on Sunday is of monumental, almost cosmic, importance. They are certain that his death and resurrection fundamentally change things, that everything is different now between human beings and God.

Parenthetically, some believe that by focusing totally on crucifixion and resurrection the church has not paid nearly enough attention to the rest of the story: that without in anyway diminishing the importance of the cross and empty tomb, perhaps we should pay a little more attention to his feeding the hungry multitude, for instance, healing the sick, welcoming the outcast, touching the untouchable,e, and , of course, the little ones, the children. Maybe we should lay more attention to the stories - about a cant across and lost young man and his father flying down the road to welcome him home, embracing and forgiving even before the boy can stammer his confession and apology: and a story about a despised racial and religious minority stopping by the side of the road to bind up the wounds of a seriously injured victim who has been left to die, ignored by religious officials who make a wide circle around him and pass by on the other side of the road. Isn't all that at least as important as what happens at the end of the story? Down through history there have been voices that reminds us - Francis of Assisi was one of them - that emulating his life, living as he taught and lived is at least as important as what we say and believe about his death and resurrection.

For more than two millennia his followers have been trying to pin down and put into words what happened and what happens, what the final meaning of his death and resurrection was and is.

The very first Christian creed is a simple three word formula: Jesus is Lord. In his death and supremely his resurrectIon, his victory over death, God has confirmed him, God's seal of approval is on him. God has made him Lord, the Christ, the anointed one. Jesus is Lord, our Lord, my Lord. To dictators, the Roman Emperor for instance, who was quite certain that he, the emperor, was the Lord, the Chritian affirmation that Jesus is Lord sounded troublesome, maybe even treason.

But that is first. Jesus is it, God's man, a Lord who claims our ultimate allegiance and obeisance.

The second attempt to put it into words and the one that has pretty much dominated Christian thinking ever since, right up to the present, is

that in Jesus' death and resurrection is our salvation. That Jesus Christ is Lord - and Savior and he does this by dying for us, laying down his life for us.The technical name for it is Substitutionary Atonement." It is base on the ancient idea that there is something radically wrong with us that requires justice and Justice requires that wrongs be punished. The sacrificial system in ancient Israel was based on that assumption. A sinner provides and offers a substitute victim to receive the punishment the sinner really deserves. A bull makes a good substitute, a calf, a lamb, a goats , a pigeon, is slaughtered on the a.tar and sometimes burned so the aroma wafts to the heavens and alerts God that a sacrifice has been made. Forgiveness, reconciliation, is now possible. Atonement is complete. (Libraries are written on the topic. This is just a sketch, a bare outline, the Readers Digest version and would not even be read at a respectable seminary!)

In the year 1,000 CE the current Archbishop of Canterbury, a man of enormous theological sophistication by the name of Anselm wrote a theological treatise, Why God became Man that lays it all out.

Everybody sins. Augustine and others said it is Original with us, Original Sin.

Human sin is an affront to God.

God is just and Justice requires that something happen to right the wrong, either punishment for the sinner or a substitute sacrificial victim.

Every human being deserves God's punishment.

But God is both just - and demands that a price be paid for sin. But God is also loving and merciful and provides a resolution. The offense is so enormous, Anselm resumed that the sati fixation use be something of enormous, infinite even, value.

So God provides the victim who will receive the punishment sinners deserve. God's own perfect, beloved son will suffer and die, Justice will be satisfied, human beings are out right with God again - saved from their sin.

Leanne Van Dyk says: "The influence of Anselm's theory of Atonement can hardly be overstated. Much of both Catholic and Protestant Atonement theory can trace its roots back to Anselm. Hymns and gospel songs often reflect Anselmian images. Anselm's ideas have filtered into the consciousness of many believers. 'Jesus died for my sins. He took my place and paid the price I owed.'" (Believing in Jesus Christ, WJK, pp77-78)

There are serious questions about Anselm's theory. Perhaps you have found yourself asking them. I have. It makes assumptions about God and how God's Justice works that many find awkward. It all feels so mechanical.

We sin and deserve punishment. Jesus steps in and gets what we deserve. Justice is satisfied."

Now, in no way do I mean or want to trivialize ideas that have profound meaning for many - including me. Without buying all of Anselm's theory I still am deeply moved when on Good Friday. I join a congregation of believers and sing Bernard of Clairvaux's words and J.S. Bach's sublime music:

"Mine, mine was the transgression,

But thine the deadly pain.

Lo, here I fall, my Savior,

Tis I deserve Thy place.

Look on me with Thy favor,

Vouchsafe to me Thy grace.

What language shall I borrow

To thank Thee, dearest friend?

O make me Thine forever:

And should I fainting be,

Lord, let me never, never

Outlive my love to Thee.

Another direction, another emphasis comes from the same time period - from a young teacher and clergyman at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Abelard was his name. Unfortunately he achieved notoriety by falling in love with a brilliant and beautiful young woman, Heloise, the niece of a prominent clergyman and Abelard's mentor. A child was conceived and their affair was discovered. Abelard was castrated and became a monk and entered a monastery. Heloise was banished to a convent. They continued their love affair by way of many letters they wrote to each other, not only expressing their undying love but also conducting a kind of high level theological conversation.

Abelard thought Anselm got it all wrong. Again Leanne Van Dyk:

"According to Abelard, the problem with humanity is a lack of love - love for God and love for one another. Jesus came and in his life convincingly demonstrated the love of God to undeserving people. Their

love is love is awakened, their virtue increases, they are people made whole again." Pp 78-79)

Abelard's theology also shows up in our piety and hymnody. Issac Watts' When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, for instance.

"When I survey the wondrous cross

On which the Prince of Gory died,

My richest gain I count but loss,

And pour contempt on all my pride.

We're the whole realm of nature mine,

That were a present far too small;

Love so amazing, so divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all."

"The persuasive power of unconditional love" is the name I give this way of thinking. We are reconciled with God, saved from our isolation, by God's unconditional love, love with no strings attached, expressed in Jesus Christ and particularly his death on the cross. There's nothing mechanical or automatic about it. That love, once we recognize and acknowledge what has happened, goes to work on us and in us, transforming us, converting us into the likeness of Christ so it is as if we were born again.

Veiled in the Flesh - an idea that changed and changes the world.

God chose our humanness, beginning with human birth, the very way everyone of us comes into the world, and a fully human life and authentically human death to come to us to show us how deeply and powerfully we are loved. God blesses us - our humanness, all of it, our very flesh, by taking it on God's self. Incarnation.

God, in Jesus Christ, experienced everything it means to be human. Nothing about us - nothing is foreign to God because Jesus lived a life like yours and mine. He laughed and wept as we do. He enjoyed the beauty of the world, a good meal and a glass of wine. He loved his community and nation and his religion and he wondered at human unfairness, injustice, suffering and cruelty just like we do. He had dear and precious friends, men and women. He loved deeply and passionately. He became impatient and angry, anxious and afraid. He did not want to die. That is the highest, holiest, most extravagant thing you can say about us - God became one of us.

Think of the enormous moral implications of God so honoring human life as to live a life on earth, to be born and live and die as we do. Think of the economic and social and political implications of that high and holy view of humankind.

In that man's death on the cross God totally and forever redefines the the idea and word "power." Good Friday is a precise and all too familiar snapshot of human power: overwhelming military might, political domination that quickly and efficiently snuffs out a human life. That's what power does in the world. Rome and a collation of religious and political opportunists made short work of a young man - as happens every single day in human history and contemporary experience.

Christianity makes the bold and radical claim that the greatest power in the world was indeed on display that day and it wasn't the Roman Governor and his beefed up legions with their shields and swords and spears and gleaming helmets. It wasn't the political and religious consortium that seemed to be calling the shots. Real power, power to change things, in individual livesand in the world was there - on the cross, the irresistible power of patient, unconditional, self-giving love.

I don't know of a more eloquent example of that fundamental Christian idea and conviction than what happened on , in a church in Charleston, S. Carolina. when a white man, seething with racial hatred, murdered African American men and women while they were praying. It was so unthinkably terrible, so absolutely evil, the kind of thing that easily brings out the worst in us. We want revenge. We want someone to pay for it. We want to answer violence with more, more violent violence. We want someone to suffer what those vulnerable women and men suffered.

And the first thing out of the mouths of the victims' loved ones was not hatred but love, not revenge but forgiveness.

That is what it means, I think, to sing that hymn:

Love so amazing, so divine

Demands my soul, my life, my all.